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Betsy Kindall ([00:08](#)):

I'm Betsy Kindall.

Nicole Fairchild ([00:10](#)):

I'm Nicole Fairchild.

Stacey Moore ([00:11](#)):

And I'm Stacey Moore.

Betsy Kindall ([00:12](#)):

And this is Arkansas Aware, a project to advance wellness and resiliency in education.

Betsy Kindall ([00:22](#)):

Welcome back everybody. We have a special guest with us today.

Nicole Fairchild ([00:27](#)):

Michael Mrazek.

Betsy Kindall ([00:28](#)):

Dr. Michael Mrazek, and he is going to tell us about this really great tool that we've been using here in Arkansas. Dr. Mrazek is from the University of California, Santa Barbara, and also works at the University of Texas in Austin.

Betsy Kindall ([00:44](#)):

He's going to tell us a little bit about Finding Focus and how it can benefit all of our teachers in the classroom, as well as our students. So tell us a little bit about Finding Focus and how it came to be.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([00:57](#)):

Sure, it sounds good. So Finding Focus is an online course that provides attention training to high school students to help them improve their focus and their emotional resilience. And it's a project that we've been working on for many years with the support of the US Department of Education and a few other foundations as well.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([01:20](#)):

And maybe I should just start by saying the motivation for why we wanted to create this. I've spent most of my academic career studying attention, and often the forms of distraction that can impair learning in educational settings. And that can include internal distractions like mind wandering, which is very common, but also external distractions like our phones.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([01:47](#)):

And there's an enormous amount of research out there that suggests that distraction is very prevalent during school, during homework, even during tests. And so there's a great need to find ways to help students actually focus their attention.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([02:06](#)):

But what our research has also shown is that attention isn't only about how long you can concentrate. It actually is a really important factor in our psychological wellbeing because where you focus really determines what you experience in life, and it can influence which thoughts and evaluations you elaborate, and ultimately what emotions you feel.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([02:31](#)):

And so empowering students with the ability to have more choice over where they focus is actually a great way of giving them more choice over how they feel. And so Finding Focus is designed both to improve focus during academic activities, but also to really empower students with the tools they need for greater emotional resilience.

Betsy Kindall ([02:56](#)):

I got to tell you, it is a super cool program. And so I do want you to explain a little bit more about the details of it, but I'll say this. When we took a look at it, we went immediately to one of our pilot schools and said, give this a try, you guys. Like give this a try. And they were very impressed with it too. So tell us a little bit about how it actually works and what those 22 days look like.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([03:26](#)):

So it's a 22 day course. It's actually not a very big time commitment because it's really only two and a half hours of total instructional time over those 22 days. There are four weekly lessons. The lessons are 12 minutes long. The whole course is digital, so it's something that students do on their own devices in the classroom.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([03:48](#)):

And each of these weekly lessons is a series of videos and interactive questions that provide students with some of the core concepts they need to understand what attention is, why it's valuable, how to train it and how to actually apply it to improve their lives.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([04:06](#)):

And then in addition to those weekly lessons, there are daily exercises that we call daily beats that actually give students the opportunity to practice training their attention, developing the skills of being able to choose an anchor for where they want to focus, actually focusing their attention there, and releasing all of the inevitable distractions that are going to arise.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([04:28](#)):

So they're practicing that every day and those exercises are short. They're just four minutes a day. And so in total, that's two and a half hours of instructional time that ideally happens in class, but some teachers choose to do some of it in class and some of it remote.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([04:45](#)):

And we do actually, we just had some, we did a recent study during COVID, which found that the course could be done entirely virtually, and still lead to beneficial outcomes. We usually don't recommend that

because it's easier to get students to do the whole course if it's in the classroom. It's possible to sort of mix and match and do some of it in class, and some of it remote.

Betsy Kindall ([05:05](#)):

I got to say, I'll tell you this. It's not like you said, hey, let's practice our attention and our focus with something super boring and let's see how long you can handle it. That is not the way this course works at all. It is very engaging and very easy to track with, but then what's great about it is you are lengthening their ability over the course of time to really stay engaged.

Betsy Kindall ([05:29](#)):

And I love that it's just snippets. So they could actually start every class period with just dedicating a little bit of time to that before they start their lesson. And I just think it's fascinating that you could see a change in students' behavior and their ability to focus over the course of that 22 days. It's really, really interesting. And our schools that utilized it were very, very impressed.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([05:57](#)):

It's interesting how, it's hard to devote that time at the beginning of class because teachers have so much that they have to cover. But what we often say is that you're devoting a little bit of time up front, but then you're increasing students' bandwidth to really be present throughout the rest of that lesson, and to develop a skill that allows them to be present in general when they're in class or doing their homework.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([06:21](#)):

And so it is a little bit of an investment of time, but it's an investment that I think pays off quite a lot in terms of how much total focus you have in the classroom with your students.

Betsy Kindall ([06:32](#)):

You're right, because it's skill development.

Nicole Fairchild ([06:35](#)):

I think also it's important to let everybody listening know that because you are funded partially through the US Department of Education, this is free. So it's free for teachers to utilize and to implement within their classrooms and for students to have access to. And I think that's an amazing opportunity for anybody that really wants to improve the climate and culture in their room and allow those students to have that skillset to focus and really engage in what's happening.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([07:09](#)):

We're very happy to share the course, and we also have a support team that is there to help teachers along the way if they need any assistance. And we also do free professional development for schools and for teachers, if they're interested in learning more about it. So yeah, we feel very lucky to get to offer all of this to schools for free.

Nicole Fairchild ([07:30](#)):

I agree. So on our Facebook and as well as the podcast, we'll link that information. But if we have teachers out there or school districts that want to access this, how would they go about doing that?

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([07:44](#)):

So the best way is to just start at our website, which is Findingfocus.app and there anyone affiliated with a high school or a district can request a teacher account. And then your teacher account would allow you to quickly get an overview of the entire course and all of the content within it. But it also allows teachers to experience the course themselves as a student would.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([08:12](#)):

One thing that I didn't mention is that the course is personalized to students in a variety of ways because one size fits all course generally isn't going to connect deeply with different interests and backgrounds of students. And so teachers get to experience that themselves by going through the course, as a student would, and seeing the different ways that it personalizes.

Betsy Kindall ([08:33](#)):

Yes, I love the way it personalizes. In fact, I went through it and I chose because you get to choose, what do you want to call it? A category of music, maybe.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([08:43](#)):

Music genre.

Betsy Kindall ([08:43](#)):

Yeah, a genre, thank you. And I thought, I want to go back and do it with a different one. Like I wonder how different my experience would've been if I had chosen a different one.

Betsy Kindall ([08:53](#)):

But I've got to say, when we first talked to you, you gave me a teacher account. And so I was able to look at what that looked like on a desktop. It is very clean and very easy and intuitive to move through, to make a class, to even count your students' participation or see what they've done and not done.

Betsy Kindall ([09:11](#)):

But then I just love that it's an app that the students just use your link, download the app. It's on their phone. They have access to it. They can do their daily beats from their own phone, from their own device. It's just so well done. It was seamless, super easy. It wasn't like we needed a lot of lead time or we needed a lot of teacher training in order to put this out there and build the skill in young people. You guys have made it just as easy and as engaging as it possibly could be.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([09:42](#)):

Yeah, I really appreciate that, and we're always working with students and teachers to keep improving it. One thing I did want to elaborate on is you mentioned changing your music genre, and just so your audience has some understanding of that.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([09:53](#)):

Those daily exercises that I said we call them daily beats. We call them daily beats because most of them involve music in one way or another. And one fun thing that we've done is we've partnered with dozens of famous musicians and we've interviewed them about the role that attention has played in their own life, in their own mental health.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([10:12](#)):

And then chosen one of their songs, and students will get to listen to a one minute interview with an artist talking about attention and why it's valuable. And then the artist invites them to try to anchor their attention on the song and they practice focusing with music.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([10:29](#)):

And so that's something that students can choose from a variety of genres. And then as you mentioned, they can change the genre as they go. And I think that part of the reason why I think that's a great approach is because it does make it more intrinsically enjoyable for students, but it also helps them see the connection between what they're doing and their real lives.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([10:50](#)):

Because students listen to music all the time, and if they can start to see the connection between being able to actually practice focusing during daily activities, then they can start to develop this skill all the time. It doesn't have to be just during formal practice. It's something they can do during their daily life.

Betsy Kindall ([11:08](#)):

That's exactly right because how many students wear one earbud all the blessed time? I mean, they've got one earbud in all the time, so that's a really, really great strategy.

Betsy Kindall ([11:20](#)):

One of the other things that we looked at when we talked to one of our pilot schools about it is where to embed this, where to embed this in curriculum. And they looked at it holistically and said, well, we want to make sure every ninth grader gets this. And they have a part of their science component where they felt like this could be considered sort of brain science and they were able to insert it into that portion of the curriculum.

Betsy Kindall ([11:49](#)):

And it worked really well. They ended up doing it in May, after testing was over, just because we had talked to you, I think right around April or something to begin with. But they were looking at how do we embed this into our curriculum pretty holistically so that every year, every freshman could get it.

Betsy Kindall ([12:07](#)):

But I know when we talked in the beginning, you had some ideas about other places where this could it easily fit into a curriculum. Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([12:18](#)):

Sure. First, I'll just say that I think that that approach that the school took was great because they're trying to find a place where it's thematically appropriate and where all students could get access. And that's oftentimes the advice that we give to schools and districts when they're trying to think proactively about what's really the best place for this course.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([12:36](#)):

Another place that often fits those criteria is a health class, and that's probably the place where we see it most often. But I also want to say that we've seen the course be successful in a huge variety of different classes, physics, math, English, psychology.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([12:52](#)):

And so if a school isn't ready to do school-wide adoption, but a teacher is really excited about sharing this with their students, we always say, go for it and see how well it works in your class because we've seen it have success in a whole variety of different contexts.

Betsy Kindall ([13:07](#)):

Yeah, I love it.

Nicole Fairchild ([13:08](#)):

I love it too. Thank you so much for sharing today a little bit about Finding Focus, and for all of you out there that are listening, thinking, oh yeah, I want to check that out. We'll have the links on our podcast notes and we'll also post it on social media.

Nicole Fairchild ([13:23](#)):

So thank you so much for joining us today.

Dr. Michael Mrazek ([13:26](#)):

Thank you so much.

Nicole Fairchild ([13:26](#)):

And stick around because we are going to talk here in our next episode a little bit about, we're going to dive back into anxiety, which we've been spending quite a bit of time on. And we're going to talk about how you could use Finding Focus maybe to address some of those issues. Thanks for joining us and we'll see you next time.